

The Weeds

Katy Simpson Smith

Anemone hortensis, star anemone

Rome without you is muffled; a wash of absence coats the stones. You thought my grief would swallow me, but lover, I have taken an apprenticeship in color: I mark down what grows, making notes so a man in a waistcoat can make a green and ordered story. Deakin claims to hold the keys to me. Not in four decades, he says, has someone combed for every plant in this great bowl, not since Napoleon put on his hat again and fled from Elba. I'd flee from here, but every other place I'd turn – my home, your bed – is barren. The Colosseum continues its crumble, the vines continue their sprawl. (The truth: I don't flee because you might return.)

Give me your faraway hand, let me put its soft skin here on this anemone: stamens and anthers of uncommon blue. Blue as oceans, as lapis paint, as the base of the horizon in heat. An early bloom. I inscribe a letter on the backs of sixteen petals: *Love, forsake me not*. There is no petal for the comma, so I leave it out.

In the ten days since you left my breath works to fill the new hole. But I must have a man's conviction – like Napoleon, you'll sail back. The ancients thought anemones wouldn't open unless the wind blew.

Delphinium peregrinum, larkspur

The flowers shoot out on racemes like comets, like columbines, like dolphins, *delphis*. Their blue is thin enough to press and save. I should press them for you. Nothing brightens a letter like a bloom. This apprenticeship is a punishment, not a bravery. I have misbehaved – you who carry the record of my trauancies must feel no surprise. My outraged father passed me to his friend and thinks I am contained: counting species in an ancient arena, kneeling to touch a rough leaf or bend back a weeping bloom, a woman left alone in public. The safest place is where all can see.

A profession is in some ways a marriage.

When Deakin explained my tasks, I was silent; as you would say, I showed him my belly. He gave me a tour of his Colosseum, pointing out the layers, the small climates, the places where light never touches and the damp spreads. He could not sit in the sun all day, he said. His work was not in compilation, but comprehension. A higher science. I was silent still. 'There is no room for trouble here,' he said. He meant this as a protection, or a threat; a paternal tone holds both.

Before you left, I passed your new husband in the street. His eye was blackened from a fight, a smear of tomato on his shirt. I would have called it blood, but I know tomato when I see it. Imagine, choosing such messiness: a man, a marriage. But I'm here, stone-set, and you're there, boat-bound, both of us watching for dolphins.

Sedum, stonecrop

S. cepaea, *S. galliodes*, *S. album*, *S. acre*, *S. reflexum*, *S. anopetalum*

I would crawl through a desert, starving for water, so I might come upon these ripe green bulbs and squeeze them in my mouth. Would they burst like berries, soak the tongue? You would say, my love, just eat the *Sedum* and find out. I wasn't at your wedding but waited on the street outside, and when you and he came out with locked arms, your eyes were too busy to find me. He, though, met mine and winked, like a sated man wanting more.

Deakin asks what I know of plants – witches and plants are kindred, my father swore to him soberly – and I stand before his desk and say that I am attentive. His arms spill over the arms of his chair, and the papers on his desk look unbrushed. I have never met a scientist. He seems no worse than a jailer or a husband. He asks me to make sketches so he can check my work, why I am so quiet, if I have a suitor, whether I am afraid of goatherds, of skunks, of him, and in my dark gray dress I force a smile, just big enough to show him fangs. He gives me a botanical dictionary.

'Get home before dark,' he says. 'At night the Colosseum fills with thieves.'

Did my father not tell him why I'm here? 'They must rob each other,' I say.

'List each plant you see,' he says, rapping his thumb on his scattered desk. 'Don't leave anything out. Posterity will judge.'

They will only judge him whose name is attached to the work. There is a freedom to invisibility; nighttime thieves know. Though I would like to write a book, better would I like to lie in bed with you, the moths our only visitors.

My fingers find them growing sideways in the cracks. One *Sedum* is crammed in a niche where the lions paced, one crawls from the paving of a tiger's pen. The stone is cold; touching a leaf is like touching skin.

Prunus avium, wild cherry

A sapling grows along the edge of the old battleground, barely tall enough to make fruit. The drupes are dark and small, following a white shower in spring. An angel tree, a tree of birds. Only its bark, striated, scarred by demon fingernails, reminds me of you, your back where the cat cut you. Cherry blood I had for dinner, until your skin was clean.

The nuns with their books look sideways at my hand on the trunk. It's late summer warm, and we all have covered our heads. I cannot imagine this arena clean, filled with white sand, camels parading for citizens. It has collapsed into another of Rome's overgrown humps. We clamber over it, men and goats. There are places to hide, places to kiss. The benches burst with shrubbery. If I did not have my ordered task, I could get lost between farms and shrines. I had thought to find a way out – surely your ship has a sister – but the weeds prove better companions than the pall of my empty room. I can wait until I smell an exit.

The day you left, I was apprehended by a night watchman (vagrancy, intent to burgle) and taken to the city jail, where I was carefully felt all over – for weapons; for womanhood – and before my father could find me, the newspapers had. I was brought home in a shroud, my drawers emptied, your words found, sticky with the sap of love, redolent of theft. It was far from my first time. He paid the men so only a small notice ran: Unknown Woman Seized; No Further Plot Revealed. I can hear your silver laugh. All we did was plot. We drew futures out of nothing.

It isn't natural, my father said, his hands pawing your letters. I said nature made us both, and him too, and stinging nettle. I had heard of Sister Benedetta, two hundred years ago, who found Christ in another nun's body. And the teacher who taught English at the grammar school, who was whispered about, who never married. A thing being rare doesn't make it wrong.

My mother now wipes the scrape of cherry dirt from my cheek, and my father says my atonement won't last long; he's finding a man for his troublesome imp, and soon my acid will be alkalized. I have a biting sense of dread.

Geum urbanum, avens

Buttercupish. Before I err, I count: the leaves in threes, for the Trinity. The petals in fives, for Christ's wounds. Hand, hand, foot, foot, chest. You were the religious one, repeating what God would and would not allow. *This?* Yes. *And this?* No.

You were also the pilgrim. In a rare daytime meeting, you took me to the Villa Borghese, where we braided around the stone pines, brushing hands like schoolgirls. A man sold us candied almonds from a cart.

'I wish my wife looked at me so,' he said.

'You should love her so,' you said, and he pinched your cheek. Your boldness made me breathless. We fed each other almonds on the algaed stoop of a hidden fountain, and I pictured your skin beneath those narrow black boots, that frilled cream dress; your scalp beneath your golden hair.

'Imagine *him*,' you laughed, 'doing to *her*,' you covered your eyes, 'what we – !'

In the evening, I separate my sanitized notes from this field-book and present them to Deakin. He examines my sketches and coughs phlegm into a cloth. His apartment is heavy with sulfur-smelling drapes, and I hold my breath until my thoughts splinter. The fresh air is spoiling me. 'Your pater said you had an affinity,' and I don't know whether he means toward you, the leaf, or the Devil.

Rubus corylifolius, bramble

The brambleberry only appears on two-year canes, suggesting that fruit is a result not of innocence but of consideration. Here in the amphitheatre they drape over the top rows, where the bread-sellers and priests are too shy to climb, and the berries go to waste. No; they are bitten before ripe by wandering goats, whose ankles don't mind the thorns. Today, high up, I take long strides, I point my toes till my calves sing and I nearly leap, it feeling like love to move so hard against the world. The sun seems to shake in the sky; I feel sweat at my temples, along the lines of my belly. Who would have used this place to kill believers?

My first letter from you will release me. Some wiser in love would advise against waiting, but in waiting too can be riotous growth – look at these bucking brambles, who do not move but are not still. Somewhere on that boat you are writing me.

I find a blade, rusted but sharp, beneath one prickly rosette, from a lance perhaps thrown by a gladiator in a last humiliation. I hide it beneath my skirts that hide my legs, take it home, and place it in a box marked *October*, which is when you might return – which is when the berries, were they uneaten, would be ripe.

Poterium sanguisorba, salad burnet

I thrill at my father's sanction each morning when I flee the house – why does he trust me to behave? He knows you're gone, and there is nothing left to steal except weeds. (All I'd wanted that night when they caught me was whatever you'd left behind. I'd grown lazy; I wore a white dress. In the dark, it screamed guilt to the watchman.) Deakin sends him regular reports – *daughter, present, pliable* – and my penance continues.

There is hardly anything passive about burnet – its bright balls of spiky blooms like hard dandelion puffs, its taste of cucumber. Francis Bacon planted it on his pathways in place of gravel so the high heels of Elizabethan ladies would crush the leaves and his garden would smell through the day of salad. What I know of plants is women's knowledge; men like Deakin study, while we inhale.

It rained today and smudged my notes – all that was left beside my sketch was *sanguis*, blood. The ink ran around it but would not touch it, like it wasn't blood but oil. Didn't you promise to write?

Vitis vinifera, common grape

A heart-shaped leaf is my favorite leaf; I traced it on your forearm. You said, 'I'm trying to listen.' A quartet of strings under the window that opened into pollinated spring. Imagine not being able to touch a woman, when we were taught that women were made to be touched.

My hands run all over this Colosseum. I fondle every part I find – stones, shards, shrubs, bones – and think I could write the book of this. You would bristle at my infidelity; you would lie awake at night seeing my fingers twist stems that aren't yours. If you wanted less from me, I congratulate you on your husband. If I wanted more – why, I have gained a green kingdom.

A grape, like clematis, is a liana, and cannot sucker or root along its lengthy vines, but must only climb, draping itself on any feature of its surroundings. It falls to the hands of scavengers with ladders, fishwives who come for midnight harvests with cedar pails and small scissors, small enough to be palmed, to be stuck in the sides of rogues. One of these women eschews wine; she wants to make raisins. She has no husband who would force her skirts, no children who yank for milk. Her parents died of plague. She'll lay out her prizes along the balcony in sun, fanned by drying sheets, and sugar them more than any other human could endure. It doesn't matter; they're her raisins. This is self-possession.

Polycarpon tetraphyllum, all-seed

Groundcover, with pink-green bells ringing along its hair in spring. It thrives in sand between the stones of the arena, imagining itself a bold plant, a warring Christian plant. My father calls on me today – or rather calls on Deakin – and finds me in the laboratory, setting leaves to paper. I hold the glue in my left hand. They tap their beards as they whisper, as if to remind themselves *we are men*, and glance over to ensure I'm not eating the leaves, or the glue. My father hopes a scientist can make rules for me, but this is a misreading of science.

If a woman ever asked how to find a calling, I'd tell her *investigate your own invention*. Perhaps she'd hear me, and put down yet another man's list.

'Your mother has chosen a duck for dinner,' my father says, examining my collage. 'Promptness is requested.' I ask him who the man is. Only bachelors merit duck. 'A patriot,' he says. By which he means a soldier, one of the radicals who dream of nationhood. Doubtless with black mustache and saber, a habit of using Latin phrases as if the language were a code invented recently. I have no country to fight for; I have only the soil. If I were a man, I would also have a house.

Deakin lives in an apartment with his blind mother above a butcher – he sometimes invites me. He likes his mother to hear a woman's voice so she can die in peace. I acknowledge it must be hard to have raised such an unhappy son, and if my presence soothes her, I am good at charade. She may mistake our discussions for lovers' talk, the way he blusters, the way I gently interject. How his voice diminishes mine.

Today I tell him of the all-seed, outlasting a century's abuse, but he is only interested in the exotics. He has his theories about the Colosseum's bounty, a plant world created not by patient growth but by action. He writes about the species brought by spores in the fur and dung of imperial trophies: lions, giraffes, rhinoceri. A global flora, a conquering biome, a smear of masculine force on the soft belly of Rome.

Dianthus prolifer, proliferous pink

When I was a girl, and before I was a thief, and well before I was a botanist's assistant, keeping my fingers in the beds where they belong, I had a set of watercolors made of crushed powder dyes. My favorite was the color that matched my mother's mouth – this was when she still spoke sweetness, before her voice grew opiate-addled and as distant as ships. In a night of sharing, when you and I had calmed enough to want things other than our bodies, I told you about these hues, and how I

would paint on brick and skin and plaster, and it was you in your woman's shape – like a mother but not at all – who told me that the color pink was named for the flower pink, so-called because it looked cut round by pinking shears; only after centuries did they borrow its shape for a color.

'And what did they call pink before?'

'I don't know,' you said, your legs sticking bare from the sheets like stalks. 'Rose.'

Romance is the bastard of simplicity. I should have started that night counting the days we had left.

***Sagina*, pearlwort**

S. procumbens*, *S. apetala

The pearlwort comes early, sprouts when sheep's stomachs are at their most echoey; the countryside rejoices when *Sagina*'s fresh green breaks through the late winter fields. My Umbrian grandmother, who could name herbs at ten paces, let me hang it in the door to keep fairies at bay. Kissing a boy with a sprig in your mouth would lock his heart to yours. The countryside understood the need for love, even for shepherds and boys, even for schoolgirls' touches, if kept quiet.

Deakin said farmers' tales have no place in the manuscript. Again he showed me the order of an entry: identification, illustration, relation. When necessary, use. Not mystical use or ancestral, but medical, agricultural. There is a bias against time here, and I must fault science for its disregard of history. Does it think knowledge is not accumulated but sudden?

'Knowledge must be *current*,' he said. 'What we know is what can be seen. Write that in your little brown book.'

I clutched it to me harder, wondering why I'd ever risk my journal in his butcher's garret.

Sagina was the plant Jesus stepped upon when he returned to earth, moist and bright, cushioning his stigma. Here near the south gate I lace my fingers in a mat of it, softer than the grasses. It holds yesterday's rain. Its prevalence is what guarantees Deakin's contempt. He would hate too the sparrows and the lambs.

***Arenaria serpyllifolia*, thyme-leaved sandwort**

My mother served the duck in thyme. The soldier pushed it around his plate, unconvinced of its edibility. It might have been a sandwort – I can't swear she didn't forage in the Colosseum with the other fat women in black – but I drew it through my teeth and caught each fragrant leaf.

He spoke above all to my father, who spoke above all to him, and my mother's only friends were the servants, so I removed one shoe beneath the table and tried lifting it by the buckle with my bare toes.

After custard and pipes, he bid farewell by walking backward out of the house, clutching my hand, so that I had to be pulled to the door – like a queen but a queen compelled – and he pressed dry lips to my cold knuckles and made a statement about the vitality of the nation. I nodded. 'Encourage him,' my father said. 'The history of the world,' I said, 'is a history of people searching for nations, and nations failing.' The soldier looked to the other man for help.

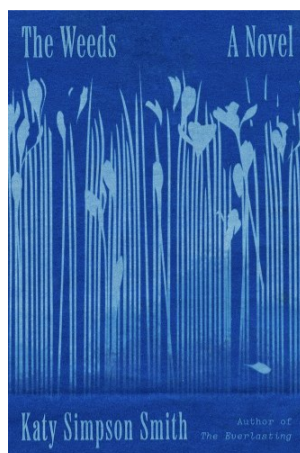
***Cerastium*, mouse-ear chickweed**

S. vulgatum*, *C. campanulatum*, *C. viscosum

Everything but the flower is covered in down, like babies – soft, tender, exact. My mother had an infant late, and it squalled for seven days before quieting into a state that she called death, but wasn't. It remained quiet for a year, if you can believe that of a child. I wouldn't have told you, anyone of fertile years, but you're gone and can't be jinxed. My mother loved it until it became too alien, and though she dressed it every day in white and washed the white weekly in holy water, it never made another sound, not even an exhalation of gas. The Devil could not be cleansed away. She prayed over

it, she let its blood, she pressed herbs against its chest, but she never loved it again. When it turned gray and dead, at last, none of us cried but felt like a chain had been taken off our chests. She opened all the windows and a lizard crawled in.

May a child like that come to no one, not your husband, not Deakin, least of all to a woman. Our duty is the preservation of life, but sometimes that means pressing our wet fingers on a wrong flame.



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